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Moscow's Afghan Quagmire: No End in Sight After Eight Years

Summary

During the eight years of the Afghan war, the Soviets have repackaged their political and diplomatic initiatives, restructured their military force, and refined their approach to counterinsurgency--with little to show for their efforts. Moscow is clearly probing for a way to establish a stable government in Kabul and to bring Soviets troops home. Just as clearly, it has not decided to do so at the price of accepting less than a Marxist-dominated regime. [REDACTED]

In the wake of an unsatisfactory combat season and the conspicuous domestic failure of national reconciliation, Moscow has recently appeared to back a shift to a harder line in Kabul that reaffirms the primacy of the Marxist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA). At the same time, intensified Soviet efforts to unravel the international coalition supporting the resistance suggest that Moscow views this as the arena showing the most promise at the moment. The Soviets may even hope that, if they are patient, the coalition of forces ranged against them will unravel on its own. [REDACTED]

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Soviet Military Options: Win, Lose, or Draw...

1. Having recognized the need to revise their strategy, the Soviets in 1985-6 added troops and equipment that improved their firepower and mobility and decreased the vulnerability of their own forces. Soviet operations shifted from large-scale offensives to a more effective combination of medium-size campaigns and widespread use of small mobile groups for raids and ambushes against insurgent arms caches, support bases, and supply lines. Extensive use of aerial and artillery firepower to support both Soviet and Afghan government operations and increasingly successful interdiction tactics began to place uncomfortable pressure on the insurgents. In addition, there were some indications of marginal improvements in the performance of the Afghan Army. These developments may have inclined the Soviets to believe they had developed an approach that might successfully erode the insurgency. [REDACTED]

2. Evaluating the Current Military Situation. Whatever positive assessment may have been sparked in Moscow by the end of 1986 probably has been undercut by this year's combat. The effective use of Stinger and other air defense weapons by the insurgents has had an impact on all aspects of combat, in addition to increasing Soviet air losses. Soviet tactics to counter the SAM threat have sharply reduced the effectiveness of air support to ground operations. Attempts to compensate by wider use of artillery fire support have been only partially successful. [REDACTED]

3. There have been other negative developments as well:

- ° The Afghan Armed Forces have continued to deteriorate, suffering from the longstanding problems of disloyalty, poor morale, inadequate training, extensive desertions, and factionalism in the officer corps.

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Despite a combat schedule at least as demanding as the previous year, the Soviets have not achieved comparable results in 1987. They spent much of their time rescuing Afghan government units that not only could not fulfill their missions but were seriously threatened. The Soviets failed this summer in an attempt to overrun an insurgent base camp at Ali Khel on the Pakistan border. The insurgents' successful defense there was in marked contrast to an offensive in the spring of 1986, when Afghan forces--with extensive Soviet fire support--were able to take an insurgent stronghold at Zawar Killi.

As a result, the Soviet's assessment of this year's combat probably has led them to conclude that "Afghanization" of the war is increasingly remote and that they may have to expend even greater effort next year just to maintain the current military stalemate. [REDACTED]

4. For their part, the insurgents probably are satisfied with their performance this year:

- ° Insurgent activity has become more widespread and successful because of the introduction of new weapons and tactics and an improved supply situation. Successes with the Stinger have improved insurgent morale and confidence. There are indications some areas, particularly in Nangarhar Province, are being resettled and farmed as refugees return to areas under insurgent control.
- ° The insurgents also have demonstrated the ability to plan and carry out some large-scale operations, and cooperation among groups has improved. Careful planning and better intelligence have permitted the commanders to attack larger targets with a greater degree of success.

- [REDACTED]
- ° The insurgents' ability to sustain combat for relatively long periods in several areas suggests their supply levels are adequate. Infusions of cash and new transportation assets have overcome last years' shortages and insurgent countermeasures have lessened the interdiction threat. [REDACTED]

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Nonetheless, some significant problems remain:

- ° Factional squabbling continues, and has hindered military operations, particularly in the north.
- ° The insurgents have not been able to mount a sustained and effective urban warfare campaign in Kabul as they had hoped to do. [REDACTED]

Weak Client in Kabul

5. Moscow's endorsement of the tough line adopted by General Secretary Najibullah at the PDPA conference in October and at the Bolshevik Revolution celebrations in November probably reflects the Soviets' recognition that yet another phase in their efforts to consolidate a Communist regime in Kabul has failed. The national reconciliation initiative proposed a year ago, which the Soviets and the regime portrayed as a sharp departure from the past, offered opposition parties--including the seven party alliance in Peshawar--undefined participation in a coalition government. Moscow apparently hoped to neutralize regime opponents and sow dissension within the resistance and between Pakistan and the alliance, but subsequent elaboration of the proposal made it clear that national reconciliation was a direct--although more ambitious--descendant of earlier policies. Moscow's goal had shifted only marginally--from building a purely Marxist regime to accepting a limited form of power-sharing in which the PDPA would retain the key levers of power. [REDACTED]

6. In addition to failing to convert any significant segments of the resistance, national reconciliation dangerously increased factionalism within the PDPA. As a consequence, even vaguely defined avenues of participation have been closed off. Najibullah's new constitution places virtually absolute power in the hands of the president--the post he assumed at the end of September. Whether the Soviets directed his power play or not, they have endorsed it and have quoted his statements that the PDPA will retain control of the presidency and the armed forces so long as there is any requirement for Soviet troops on Afghan soil. Soviet media have also repeated his declaration that the Afghan Army is too weak to stand alone, thus pushing the withdrawal of Soviet forces further into the future. [REDACTED]

International Diplomacy--The Image of Flexibility

7. During the first two years of the war, Moscow was on the diplomatic defensive, trying to remedy the damage the invasion had done to its relations with China, the West, and the nations of the Third World. Under the pressure of condemnation by the United Nations and a series of Third World organizations, Moscow

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moved to improve its image by reluctantly permitting Kabul's participation in the UN-sponsored proximity talks in Geneva. Moscow stalled its way through several years of negotiations, using the Geneva forum to test Pakistani resolve while exploiting the propaganda value of appearing to negotiate seriously. This tack continued through 1985, with Kabul's insistence that direct talks precede further discussion of the relationship between troop withdrawal and agreements on noninterference, guarantees, and the return of the refugees. [REDACTED]

8. In late 1985, Moscow began to put out signals in a variety of informal channels of serious interest in cutting a deal on Afghanistan. Public gestures followed, including Gorbachev's Party Congress speech early in 1986 in which he referred to Afghanistan as a "bleeding wound," the sham withdrawal of six Soviet regiments in the fall that year, and movement in the Geneva sessions on the issue of setting a withdrawal timetable. These signals and gestures appear to have been primarily propaganda tools designed to put Islamabad and Washington on the defensive in the hope of securing "reciprocal" concessions. [REDACTED]

9. Intensified Diplomatic Activity. Early this year, the Soviets expanded their efforts to signal their desire to get out of Afghanistan and to persuade Islamabad to deal, but there was no meaningful change in the substance of Moscow's policy. In a dual track campaign, Soviet and Afghan military pressure on Pakistan increased sharply, shifting from cross-border raids to terrorist bombings that raised the spectre of increased unrest inside Pakistan, while Moscow used national reconciliation as the basis of a campaign to display Soviet 'reasonableness' and to secure international recognition of the Afghan regime. After dangling the prospect of an interim coalition government under former Afghan king Zahir Shah, however, the Soviets avoided discussions of the composition of a coalition with Islamabad. And after raising expectations that a significant move on the timetable for Soviet troop withdrawal would be made at the Geneva session in September, Moscow failed to deliver. The Soviets probably determined that the regime was too weak to sustain even an agreement in principle to a short withdrawal timeframe and that more attention had to be paid to PDPA coherence. To give the impression that movement in negotiations nonetheless continues, the Soviets have more recently tried to shift the diplomatic focus to the composition of a future government in Kabul, soliciting ideas on a coalition and angling to have Pakistan and the UN take the initiative in setting up talks between the resistance and the regime. [REDACTED]

10. The free rein recently given to Najibullah to consolidate his power, however, risks undermining Moscow's

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international promotion of the regime's flexibility and sincerity. Together with the letdown at Geneva in September, Najibullah's activities in Kabul may have influenced the outcome of the UN General Assembly's vote on Pakistan's resolution on Afghanistan in mid-November. Intense Soviet lobbying to reduce support for the resolution or to water it down with amendments was defeated, and the original resolution passed by a slightly greater margin than last year. In the wake of the UN setback, the Soviets have floated hints that a 12-month withdrawal timeframe might be offered at next month's US-Soviet summit, a move that they probably hope will regain the public relations initiative and put pressure on the other side to offer concessions. Concern over Kabul's stability may once again keep the Soviets from following through on these hints, however. [REDACTED]

Whither Soviet Policy?

11. Moscow is clearly probing for a way to secure a stable government in Kabul and bring home Soviet troops, but just as clearly has not decided to do so at the price of accepting less than a PDPA-dominated regime. The Soviets are keeping their options open by continuing to build up their military and political infrastructure in Afghanistan. The costs of this involvement--including increasing popular dissatisfaction within the USSR, continuing international disapproval, and the greater difficulty of maintaining the military stalemate--do not appear to have forced them to revise their strategy fundamentally. Despite the bleak prospects for building a client in Kabul that can stand on its own, they probably hope that, if they are patient, the coalition of forces ranged against them will unravel, making revision unnecessary. [REDACTED]

12. Adjustments on the Ground. The Soviets could reasonably judge that the continuing decline of the Afghan Army and improvements in insurgent weapons, tactics, and morale will require Soviet troops to carry an even greater burden next year. Routine operations, such as road clearing and convoy protection, may be more difficult. Offensive operations may call for more resources than have been allocated in the past. Nonetheless, we believe that the Soviets have shown that they are prepared to support the kind of expanded commitment on the ground that might be necessary next year. They appear no more willing to let the Kabul regime be defeated in combat than they are to negotiate its demise, and they probably believe that they can continue to exploit some insurgent weaknesses:

- ° The Soviets have no reason to believe that the insurgents can translate a successful defensive operation into a substantial offensive threat. The bulk

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of major combat continues to be at times, and places of Soviet choosing, and the Soviets probably judge that the insurgents in most regions are less well prepared and have less plentiful supplies than at Ali Khel.

- ° The Soviets are continuing to improve their infrastructure, conduct routine combat operations, and implement urban security measures--all signs of continued Soviet commitment. They have withdrawn from two small isolated garrisons and may plan consolidation of other units that are inactive or difficult to resupply. [REDACTED]

12. Moreover, we believe the Soviets for some time have been persuaded that without extensive augmentation of their combat forces--a step we think they are not now likely to take--they will not be able to eliminate the insurgency or reduce it to a threat with which the Afghan government can cope so long as outside support continues. Consequently, we believe the Soviets will focus increasingly on efforts to disrupt the international coalition supporting the resistance. Vigorous combat operations inside Afghanistan serve this strategy in several ways. They maintain the threat of breaking the resistance on the ground; they counter any perception within the resistance or among its supporters that the Soviets have lost the initiative in Afghanistan; and they support at least the bare minimum of any viable negotiating position--the continued existence of the Kabul regime and its Armed Forces. As a result, the pace of combat activity inside Afghanistan is likely to remain stable or even increase next year. Military pressure against Islamabad in the form of terrorist attacks inside Pakistan probably will continue as well, although the Soviets may not sponsor a return to the level of cross-border bombing seen earlier this year in order to avoid negative publicity. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

14. The Soviets may take other steps to offset the negative developments identified during this year's combat. These could include modest increases in troops--particularly Spetsnaz--and equipment, allocating more resources for individual offensives, planning for a few longer campaigns than we have seen this year, or reinforcing areas that have been particularly hard-pressed, such

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as Qandahar. The Soviets may look for a dramatic target among the insurgent depots in the border region and move against it in greater force. Moscow might choose several of these options both for their concrete military impact and their potential effect on the morale of the resistance and the political will of its supporters. [REDACTED]

15. Continued Regime Consolidation and Negotiation. Moscow is unlikely to alter its current political tactics significantly during the next few months as it waits to assess several expected or possible developments:

- ° A "grand council" convened by Kabul before the end of the year to adopt a new constitution.
- ° The impact of Najibullah's moves to purge party dissidents.
- ° A visit to Islamabad by First Deputy Foreign Minister Vorontsov.
- ° The US-Soviet summit.
- ° A possible US-Pakistani showdown over the nuclear proliferation controversy.

16. During this period, the Soviets will probably continue to suggest an interest in discussing an Afghan coalition, but they are unlikely to engage in detailed discussion themselves or to agree to a format for the Afghan parties to negotiate it. For this reason, it is possible that they will continue to postpone naming a date for Vorontsov to go to Islamabad, where the Pakistanis expect to discuss such plans. [REDACTED]

17. Once current trends have played themselves out more fully, it may become clearer to the Soviets how well the regime can withstand the inevitable strains that any serious negotiations would bring and how strong the resistance and its supporters are likely to remain. Even if Najibullah's recent measures produce an apparently more docile party, they will not put the lid on resistance to his policy or end rank-and-file apprehension that "national reconciliation" is the prelude to a Soviet sell-out. Unless the situation deteriorates markedly, however, Moscow is unlikely to replace Najibullah in the near future. He remains a potential bargaining chip in negotiations with Pakistan and the resistance, and the Soviets probably do not view any of the possible successors as significant improvements. [REDACTED]

18. Although greater unity in Kabul would enable them to proceed with more confidence, the Soviets are unlikely to give up

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the diplomatic initiative indefinitely, as it remains central to their efforts to split the various forces aligned against them on Afghanistan. Before the end of 1988, the Soviets will probably:

- ° Have the Afghans propose a 12-month withdrawal timetable at Geneva or propose it themselves during high-level talks with Pakistan or the United States. The Soviets will continue to insist that implementation of any timetable is contingent on the end of "outside interference" and agreement on interim arrangements for a coalition government in Kabul. They are unlikely to commit to specific dates or mechanics for the withdrawal.
- ° Agree to some sort of forum under UN auspices for discussion of a coalition. Moscow might propose a plan--such as an international conference--that would give the Afghan regime greater standing than the proposals so far made by the UN negotiator and the Pakistanis.
- ° Resume "national reconciliation" offers to the resistance, increasing the number of posts open to insurgents and exiles.
- ° Develop new propaganda gambits, possibly including another token withdrawal. [REDACTED]

19. A Break With Past Policy? There have been hints that over the longer term Moscow may be considering entering into a discussion of solutions that do not provide for the dominance of the PDPA. UN negotiator Cordovez's plan for setting up talks on a new government, which he claims has the Soviets' go-ahead, calls for Kabul's representatives to attend in their PDPA rather than their government capacities. Moscow may even be preparing the ground domestically and internationally for such an eventuality. Soviet domestic media have recently given prominence to discussion of the presocialist stage of Afghanistan's development and the necessity for compromises. [REDACTED]

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20. A decision to accept less in Afghanistan, however, would be a major risk for Gorbachev, who has already spent considerable political capital to push through domestic and economic reforms in the face of opposition from conservatives in the party and, presumably, the military. His political vulnerability was underlined by the recent demotion of his ally, Moscow party chief Yel'tsin. Gorbachev's opponents would cite the "loss" of Afghanistan as a blow to Soviet prestige and a threat to Soviet security, and might attempt to use the issue to force a retreat

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from domestic reform or even as a catalyst to bring about his removal. Given that the costs of involvement in Afghanistan--while increasing--remain tolerable and that Gorbachev is now apparently in a period of political retrenchment in Moscow, we believe that, rather than run such a risk, he is likely to continue current Soviet policy over the next year.

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